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ABSTRACT

Self-schemas are knowledge-structures that organize information relevant to the "self." Research has demonstrated that persons who are schematic (versus aschematic) for a particular trait process self-relevant information on that dimension more efficiently. To determine whether individual self-schemas are organized into relatively schematic and aschematic trait domains by conceptually replicating previous research on an intra-individual rather than inter-individual level, 37 undergraduates completed prose descriptions, self Q-sorts, self-referent judgments, behavioral examples, and analyses of counterschematic information. As predicted, subjects made faster self-referent judgments, provided more behavioral examples, and better resisted disconfirmation for individually schematic than for individually aschematic traits. The findings suggest that individuals differ in the trait domains for which they are schematic and aschematic, a concept that may have important implications for future research on the "self." (Author/JAC)

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Individual Self-Schemas and Processing Information About the Self

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Individual Self-Schemas and Processing Information About the Self

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Schemas are knowledge-structures that organize experience and guide information-processing (Taylor & Crocker, 1981). Perceivers have schemas about social events (Abelson, 1976; Bower, Black, & Turner, 1979), persons (Cantor & Mischel, 1977), and themselves (Markus, 1977; Markus & Smith, 1981). Markus (1977) provided strong evidence for processing differences between persons schematic and aschematic on a single trait dimension; an interesting extension of these results would be the demonstration of parallel processing differences within an individual for schematic and aschematic trait dimensions. Such differences should include 1) shorter response latencies when judging the self-descriptiveness of individually schematic traits than aschematic traits, 2) ability to generate more behavioral examples of individually schematic than aschematic traits, and 3) greater resistance to disconfirmation of individually schematic than aschematic traits. Evidence of intra- individual schematicity would also call into question assumptions of a unitary "self-schema."

We defined schematic traits as those that individuals had rated extremely characteristic or uncharacteristic of themselves and aschematic traits as those that individuals had rated neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic of themselves (cf. Markus, 1977). We used predominantly positive traits in order to increase the

probability of idiosyncratic trait ratings. Measures included latency to judge the self-descriptiveness of schematic and aschematic traits, number of behavioral examples generated for schematic and aschematic traits, and resistance to information confirming and disconfirming schematic and aschematic traits.

Method

Subjects were 37 Princeton undergraduates paid for participation.

Procedure

Prose Descriptions. As part of a large questionnaire packet, subjects were asked to write a paragraph describing each of four topics: "Your Hometown," "Princeton University," "The Place Where You Live," and "Your Favorite Course".

Self Q-Sort. In the same packet, subjects used the Q-Sort technique to describe themselves using a set of 100 moderately positive trait adjectives (Chew and Nasby, 1981). Subjects sorted the 100 traits into 9 categories ranging from least descriptive (1) to most descriptive (9) of themselves, with a forced distribution of 3, 7, 12, 18, 20, 18, 12, 7, and 3 items in categories 1-9 respectively.

Self-Referent Judgments. One month later, in a one-hour, single-subject laboratory session, subjects saw the same 100 traits presented in random order on a microcomputer screen. They responded to each trait by pushing one of two buttons marked "me" and "not me," and were unaware that the computer was recording response latencies.

Generating Behavioral Examples. Subjects were given eight cards, each containing one of the 100 words previously rated. They were asked to determine whether or not the word was self-descriptive, and were

given two minutes to list as many examples as possible of their having displayed that trait (if self-descriptive) or its opposite (if not self-descriptive). Subjects were unaware that the eight traits were randomly selected, one from each of their eight non-neutral categories (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9).

Resisting Disconfirming (Counterschematic) Information. Subjects were asked to evaluate four experimental computer programs which were said to "analyze an individual's personality from the semantic structure of his or her prose." Each subject received four computer-printed "personality profiles," supposedly based on analyses of their prose descriptions. One profile disconfirmed four traits randomly drawn from "schematic" categories 1, 2, 8, and 9; one profile disconfirmed four traits randomly drawn from "aschematic" categories 3, 4, 6, and 7; one confirmed four other schematic traits; and one confirmed four other aschematic traits.[1] Order of presentation was randomized. Subjects were asked to rate the accuracy of each profile on a scale ranging from 1 (extremely inaccurate) to 6 (extremely accurate).

Results

Response latencies were standardized within each of the 100 traits. Analyses performed on raw score latencies would be misleading, as subjects in general may have placed extremely short, meaningful, affective, or likable words at the extreme ends of the Q-Sort distribution. Transforming raw scores into standardized scores eliminated alternative explanations based on reading-time, meaningfulness, social desirability, or other dimensions orthogonal to

schematicity.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Latency of Self-Referent Judgments

If individually schematic traits are processed more efficiently than individually aschematic traits, subjects should have made self-referent judgments faster for their 20 category 1, 2, 8, and 9 traits than for their 20 category 5 traits. A dependent t test performed on average standardized response latencies supported this prediction, t (36) = 4.31, p <.001. Table 1 shows that relative to the way other subjects responded to the same words, subjects responded faster to those traits for which they were individually schematic (mean z = - .12) than individually aschematic (mean z = + .08).[2]

Number of Behavioral Examples

If behavioral examples are more available for individually schematic traits than individually aschematic traits, subjects should have generated more behavioral examples for traits placed in Q-Sort categories 1, 2, 8, and 9 than for traits placed in categories 3, 4, 6, and 7. This prediction was also supported, t (36) = 2.95, p <.01. On the average, as shown in Table 1, subjects were able to supply 13.08 behavioral examples for schematic traits and only 12.00 behavioral examples for aschematic traits.

Resistance to Disconfirming (Counterschematic) Information

If individually schematic traits are more resistant to disconfirmation than individually aschematic traits, subjects should

have formed more polarized appraisals of computer-generated "personality profiles" confirming or disconfirming schematic than aschematic traits. A 2 (trait: schematic vs. aschematic) x 2 (information: confirming vs. disconfirming) analysis of variance of these data revealed a main effect of type of information, $F(1,36) = 127.06$, $p < .001$, and the predicted trait x information interaction, $F(1,36) = 22.09$, $p < .001$. For individually aschematic traits, the confirming personality profile was rated as 1.11 scale points more accurate (4.03 vs. 2.92). For individually schematic traits the confirming profile was rated as 2.60 scale points more accurate (4.76 vs. 2.16).

Discussion

These results highlight the selectivity and nonunity of the self-schema. Within the same person's self-concept, some traits are judged faster, better supported, and more resistant to disconfirmation. If the "self" is a theory we hold about ourselves (Epstein, 1973; 1980), some tenets of the theory are held more confidently than others.

James (1890), Freud (1923), Lewin (1935), Hilgard (1949), and Allport (1965), all viewed the self as a set of interdependent constructs rather than as a single unified entity. More recently, Markus and Sentis (1981) have defined the self as a system of schemas, and Greenwald (1982) has reviewed available evidence to show that an assumption of self-unity is unjustified. The present results support Greenwald's conclusion by demonstrating that individuals differ in the trait domains for which they are schematic and aschematic.

Although the present study did not address the origins of "self-

schema selectivity," several recent papers suggest likely candidates. Within the same individual, some traits may be based on episodic memories and others on semantic generalizations (Greenwald, in press, b), some may be more accessible in memory (Higgins, Kuiper, & Olson, 1981; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976; Wyer & Srull, 1981), and some may be more ego-involving (Greenwald, 1980; Ross, 1981). Further, some traits may seem more informative (Fiske, 1980; Hastie, 1980) or central (Asch, 1946; Kelley, 1950; Ostrom, Pryor, & Simpson, 1981). Finally, individuals may differ in their affective involvement with trait domains, which could affect response latency and memory (Moreland & Zajonc, 1977; Zajonc, 1980, a, b).[3]

If individuals differ in the traits they consider schematic and aschematic regions of their self-schemas, these differences could affect several behaviors of interest to social and personality psychologists. Individuals may be likely to construe others along trait dimensions that are self-schematic (Lemon & Warren, 1974; Markus & Smith, 1981), to tailor self-presentations to emphasize one trait domain over another (Jones & Pittman, 1982), and to pursue idiosyncratic "self- maintenance strategies" (Swann & Reed, 1981). When made self-aware (Duval & Wicklund, 1972; Wicklund, 1975), individuals may focus on different aspects of self-evaluation, particularly if trait domains are arranged heirarchically (Carver & Scheier, 1981).

Intra-individual schematicity can also affect memory for self-referent information (Keenan & Baillet, 1980; Lord, 1980; Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977). Kuiper and Derry (1981) have found that the self-referent memory of depressives is as good as that of non-

depressives but that depressives show self-referent memory superiority on one set of traits and nondepressives on another. A further application of these results might be to the debate over the cross-situational consistency of behavior (Mischel, 1968). "Inconsistency" has been attributed to differing perceptions of situations by individual subjects and the experimenter (Bem & Allen, 1974). Lord (1982) showed that individuals' cross-situational consistency could be predicted from their idiosyncratic perceptions of trait similarity among the situations and their own self-schemas.

The present study's demonstration that individuals differ in reactions to traits relatively schematic and aschematic within their self-schemas may thus have important implications for future research on the self. Possible approaches emphasize the origins of selective schematicity and the consequences for social behavior. Both approaches require a more sophisticated view of the self as a nonunitary construct.

Footnotes

1. Strictly speaking, category 5 was the only "aschematic" category, but subjects could not be expected to provide consistent behavioral examples or resist disconfirmation for traits that they had labelled as "neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic."

2. Separate analyses indicated that traits rated very characteristic (8 or 9) were judged significantly faster than aschematic traits (5), t (36) = 6.13, $p < .001$, whereas traits rated very uncharacteristic (1 or 2) were not, t (36) = 1.00, ns. This may have been a function of the predominantly positive trait set in which traits rated 1 or 2 were only relatively uncharacteristic. A follow-up study still being analyzed found characteristic traits were judged significantly faster than aschematic traits ($p < .05$) and uncharacteritic traits to be marginally faster ($p < .08$) when a trait set including both positive and negative traits was used.

3. Markus (1977) selected subjects on the basis of a question regarding perceived importance of the trait dimension, a criterion not used in the present study, which may have tapped some or all of these differences.

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Table 1

Latency of self-referent judgments and number of behavioral examples for traits as a function of Q-Sort placement.

	Most Uncharacteristic								Most Characteristic
Q-Placement:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Mean Response Latency (in z-scores)	-.06	.04	.15	.11	.08	-.02	-.20	-.24	-.31
Mean Number of Behavioral Examples	3.62	2.81	2.86	3.00	--	3.03	3.11	3.19	3.46